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SALON OF THE DILETTANTI—VII

PIPE-LEAD "CRITICISM" IN ART

Didn't the members think the discussions of the Salon had thus far been rather negative? asked one of the Dilettanti at the monthly meeting. Why should they not be? retorted the Stickler for Sense. Hadn't the world had enough of the flambuoyant twaddle—in the name of "criticism"—that made every dauber of paint a master of color, every mediocre performance a *chef d'œuvre*, every tyro in his profession the equal—or superior—of Rembrandt, Reynolds, Raphael and the rest of the old fellows that Art honored and swore by? Did such "criticism" subserve any purpose other than that of mystifying and making dupes of well-intentioned art patrons? In fact was there to-day much periodical art literature that could legitimately be called "art criticism;" hadn't it been largely supplanted by "art write-ups"—just as book reviewing had degenerated into book noticing, and dramatic criticism had evolved into dramatic puffery?

It was a conscienceless enterprise, the Stickler admitted, for a publisher to condemn a book that was being well advertized, or pull over the coals a troupe of stars or barnstormers whose liberal announcements made revenue. Honest, exhaustive book reviews, such as Macaulay used to write for the old "Edinburgh," were as a consequence a thing of the past; and stage tomfooleries and puerilities evoked the tribute of eulogy. Wasn't it lamentable that business should so befuddle brains, and cash should so circumscribe criticism? The Stickler a pessimist? Not a bit of it, he protested. Facts were facts, and he who ran needn't stop to read.

What was wrong with the "critics?" Leave it an open question, suggested one of the Dilettanti. The Stickler was willing, but all the same he wished to record his conviction that much of the so-called art criticism of the day was the eulogistic vapping of incompetence; and much more, the equally eulogistic vapping of business calculation. He had recently charged the editor of an eastern art paper with maintaining a well-balanced equipoise between his news notes and his advertising columns. "My dear fellow," replied the editor, "that is the enforced condition of making a profit." *Sic gloria artis!* The art critic of a great New York daily had within a month admitted to the Stickler that he knew nothing whatever about the history, theory or practice of art and that his only qualification for his position was "temperament." Again, *sic gloria artis!* Reduced to a logical conclusion, the basis of the editor's statements was the condition of his cash box, and the basis of the critic's judgment was an opinion not his own.

Apropos of the subject under consideration the Stickler had been much impressed with the profundity of mere words, and the ease with which a phrase was made to meet a purpose. It was a school-boy's job, he insisted, for any "art critic"—a term much prostituted in common

parlance, since it usually meant "art reporter"—to indulge glibly in the stock words and stereotyped cant of art literature—to talk knowingly of a picture as being "convincing," or "frank," or "direct," or "loose," or "broadly done;" to advert to its "masterful technique" or "personal handling;" to speak of it as being "strictly interpretative;" to mention



TIME—FOR PENNSYLVANIA STATE CAPITOL

By Vincenzo Alfano

(An advisory board would keep high the standard of such work)

its "tonal effects" or its "rich color harmonies;" to classify it as being "thoroughly representative" of this, that or the other school. Now, it was undoubtedly true that Addison formulated a sane rule when he enunciated generations ago that the highest function of criticism was to point out beauties and not defects. It was also true that Kant wrote more wisely than he knew when he shrouded his ideas—or lack of ideas—in verbal obscurities. Hadn't Dante, Shakespeare—and Browning—not to mention a host of other idols of clubs and coteries, been veritable Klondikes of riches which no one but a commentator of industry and ingenuity could have discovered for the common ruck of humanity? And hadn't Horne Tooke brought a Billingsgate fishwife to the tears of acknowledged subjection by firing at her a volley of unintelligible terms from the higher mathematics? Undoubtedly elucidators of acumen and mystifiers of cleverness had their office in literary—and

art—economy. An ingenious critic — or reporter — could think into a work charms and subtleties the author — or painter — never dreamed of, and could couch them in such vague phraseology as to carry conviction. But after all the Stickler contended that proper discrimination would eliminate many of the people and works written about, and proper consideration for the reader would abolish professional critical verbiage.

In a recent issue of a prominent English art magazine, for instance, the Stickler had read a write-up of a couple of American artists, in terms such as to imply that they were about the only two people on this side of the Atlantic "doing art," when to his certain knowledge it had



FOUNTAIN
By Herman Billing
(More memorial than beautiful)



FOUNTAIN OF LOVE
By E. Derre
(More erotic than estimable)

been on more than one occasion the protests of the one and the tears of the other that had gained them admission even to their local art exhibitions. Was it worth while, was it honest, to present these people in such a way as to give them in public estimation a false rank? In an American journal that was aiming to mould public opinion the Stickler had seen not so long ago a school-boy in art written up by a pink-tea talker

and penny-a-liner, and in the same pages the pink-tea talker and penny-a-liner presented by the school-boy in art. Each treated the other as a man of international importance—a swapping of courtesies—and neither was known even to the well-informed art lovers of his own town. Had either done anything to give him the standing in art that would be implied by the appearance of the articles? Just the other day the announcement was gravely made in one of the great metropolitan dailies that the most im-



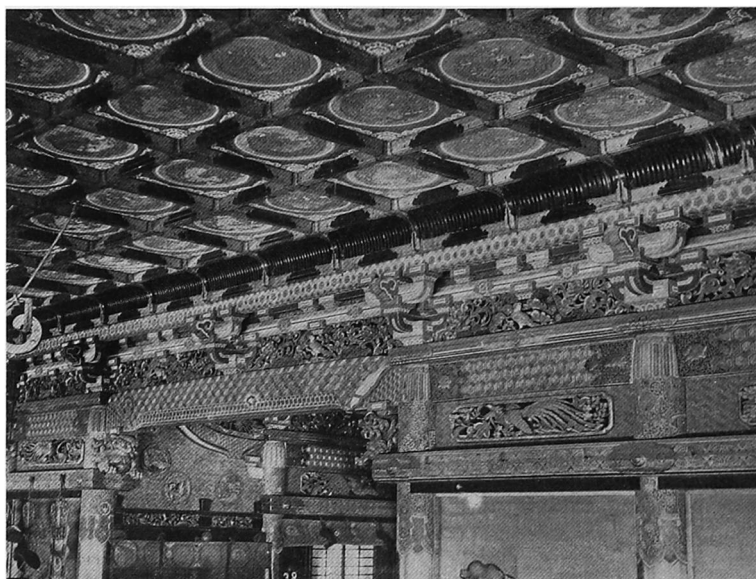
UNSAFE TENEMENT

After an Etching by J. McNeill Whistler

(Artistic on paper; to be abolished in fact)

portant collection of certain Dutch painters ever brought to this country was to be seen at such-and-such a gallery. The interesting point was that these were the exact words used to the Stickler himself by the importer a week before the notice appeared. In other words, the "art critic" took her cue from the dealer, and made an *ex cathedra* statement—for the benefit of the public—on a matter of which she had no knowledge or judgment. Was such criticism informing? Another journal announced with equal gravity that a certain china decorator—whom the Stickler chose to call Mary Brown—was decorating a set of china for Mrs. Hooley—another blind handle for a personality—which was something wholly uncommon in point of quality. Now, the Stickler maintained that the only two people interested in the matter were Mary, who wanted the world to know she copied Hales and Van Dykes on porcelain, and Mrs.

Hooley, who wanted society to know she had "hand-painted" china. The motive of both in interest was notoriety—and was the great art world edified? Only a few months ago the Stickler had read—without interest—in an art journal an account of the gallery of a Western picture fancier, fully illustrated, with the text furnished *by the agent who had sold the collector all his works, and hoped to sell him more!* A rich com-



TEMPLE FRIEZE AND CEILING, EMPEROR'S ROOM, JAPAN
(Another field for an advisory board)

bination of stupid personal puffery and shrewd business tact! Was it vital to the art education of the American public that the people should know that Mr. Blank had invested \$100,000 in imported pictures and \$200,000 in Diamond Match, or \$100,000 in Diamond Match and \$200,000 in imported pictures. If the collector didn't want the notoriety, the article was an unjustifiable invasion of privacy; if he did want it—plus a certain number of copies of the journal for distribution—it was an equally unjustifiable catering to the pride of priggishness. In any event the public was not benefited by—nor was it lying awake nights looking for—this sort of art information.

And still, the Stickler continued, the Dilettanti questioned the worth of negative discussion. Pipe-lead criticism—if not a crime—was at least an offense; and negative discussion was needed. The Stickler recalled

the incident of a New York painter who had lately broken into the exhibitions, and who had been given an article for just what he was—a promising young artist. The beneficiary of polite attention wrote a letter of protest because he had been presented to the public as only “a promising young artist”—he wanted the world to think—over the shoulder of the journal that noticed him and his work—that he had already gotten there! But artists weren’t like cucumbers; the latter were old enough to market as soon as they were big enough, but the former had to get ripe—do something sufficiently worthy to merit the honor of a public debut in art journalism.

Indiscriminate eulogy and unwarranted write-ups were, the Stickler thought, two of the greatest evils of so-called art criticism. It was true that all artists wanted to get before the footlights, since for them, as for operatic stars, notoriety was life. It was equally true that the public wanted to know about those it ought to know about. But the presentation—let alone the eulogy—of petty interests, mediocre works, or little fellows was a compliment of doubtful import to them; it was an imposition on, if not an affront to, the public; it was a positive reflection on the art that should be fostered. When big men were side-tracked, why should little fellows be put on dress parade? When great art movements in which the public should be interested were ignored, why should petty interests be exploited? When not one in one hundred thousand people had the slightest idea of the glories of the great institutions that were created and maintained for the public pleasure and profit, was it not an affront to the altruistic spirit of the nation that projected and carried out these great enterprises to slight its efforts and achievements and dish up the personal art holdings of Tom, Dick or Harry who made millions in swine, scrapiron or stock gambling? If no art work or art worker were written up but those worthy of serious public consideration, there would be no need of negative discussion. But, the Stickler concluded—and he promised to air some more of his notions at a future meeting—so long as there was a more or less patent connection between weaklings and write-ups, between pull and publicity, between pink teas and prizes—never mind the rest of the alliteratives, interposed one of the Dilettanti—there was need of and *would* be negative discussions in the Salon.

REPORTED BY THE SALON’S SECRETARY.

